Volume 35
Number 1 *Special 50th Anniversary Edition*

Article 8

7-2008

Historical Archaeology in the Jackson Purchase: A Prospectus

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE JACKSON PURCHASE: A PROSPECTUS

Kit Wesler

- originally appeared in Volume X, 1982 Journal

Historical archaeology can no longer be called a new field of study, and yet the investigation of historic sites in Kentucky has barely begun. Few major investigations of historic sites have been conducted in the Commonwealth, and none has taken place in the Jackson Purchase. Amateur archaeologists are aware of Civil War sites in the region, and their studies will be valuable aids in interpreting military sites of the era. But attempts to understand the early settlement of the Purchase, and the ways of life of its people through the scores of years since the land was open to Euro-American trade and society, are completely lacking. In light of the rich heritage of the Purchase, it is difficult to see why the potential of its historic sites has been so overlooked.

There are two main subfields of historical archaeology with which Kentucky investigators will be concerned. The first is the archaeology of historically known groups of Indians, from the

time just before the first records were kept. This period is often known as the Contact period, when Native American peoples encountered Europeans who eventually wrought drastic changes in Indian societies. Historians study these people through the eyes of the European and American witnesses, but archaeologists study sites that have not been pre-interpreted by non-Indian observers. Archaeologists can show, for instance, that Indian society had already begun to change even before the first European trader came into the region. Historians know this, but cannot directly study the period before the first records were written down.

The earliest Contact sites in a region such as the Jackson Purchase will be marked by only a very few items of European manufacture, small objects such as beads that have passed through Indian trade networks far beyond the limits of European settlement. From that point forward, investigators can trace the gradual reorganization of Indian communities and social patterns, as the people adopted more and more of the Euro-American technology and their own material culture finally disappeared. This cultural addiction did not happen suddenly, but with it came new modes of occupying the land, of finding food, of hunting for a peltry trade rather than for personal

use. The Chickasaw are not thought to have maintained large villages in Kentucky's Jackson Purchase, but even hunting or raiding camps, such as the base camp from which one of the Colberts led a 1780 siege of Fort Jefferson, can lend insight into the processes of acculturation.

The more common meaning of "historical archaeology" is the study of the sites of non-Indian peoples who came into the land in the most recent centuries. These are the people who left records of their times and their activities, records from which we have learned so much. But only a few of these settlers actually wrote very much at all, and most persons left behind only their homesteads, and later, their hamlet, factories, shops, and farm buildings to mark their lives. In the ruins of their buildings, in the material objects they left around those buildings whether ruined or still standing, archaeology can learn of lives that never left a single written word, and also of the everyday lives of those who wrote much about only a few matters.

Historical archaeology can be approached as a form of social history, with which changes from frontier to modern society, from self-sufficient homesteaders to town-dwelling businessmen, can be followed in abundant detail. James Deetz has

recently shared some of the surprising perspectives he has gained through archaeological studies of society in colonial New England.[1] Knowing from history the impact of the Great Awakening on philosophical thought, Deetz has shown that the entire world-view of Americans changed from the seventeenth to the later eighteenth centuries. During that period colonists began to cook their food in individual portions rather than in communal pots, to throw their trash in special areas rather than under their feet, to build their houses for personal privacy and for aesthetic facades. Deetz shows that the Great Awakening was not simply a religious experience, but a symptom of a process in which many colonists came to see the structure of their world, their society, and their places in both, in a new way –a way that shaped the American Revolution, and the communities in which we live today.

Of course, much research must be done before similar insights can be drawn from studies in the Jackson Purchase. The problem is only partly that the data have not been gathered, however. An even more fundamental problem, one that occurs in all areas of the country and not just Kentucky, is that historians, geographers, and archaeologists have not talked among themselves

enough to direct fruitful studies. By and large, historians do not realize that archaeology does more than produce artifacts for museum displays. In part, this is the fault of the archaeologist, who has not begun to answer questions that historians could ask. But it is also the fault of historians who do not ask questions amenable to archaeological answers. Archaeologists cannot see individuals or politics, but then can see groups and processes in which historians are also interested. The fact that the owner of a pottery kiln in Paducah was named J. A. Bauer cannot usually be found by archaeology, but that farmers in counties of West Kentucky, southern Illinois, and southeastern Missouri bought and used his products can, perhaps, be shown.

Questions about settlement and society in a frontier area, and how the frontier developed into modern Wet Kentucky, are perfectly suited to investigations in the Jackson Purchase. The Archaeology program at Murray State University has recently received a grant from the Heritage Division of the Kentucky Department of the Arts that will enable us to begin such a study, and to bring historical archaeology to the Purchase. The project will have two major parts, a background study and a field survey.

The background study may, in the long run, be the more important part. We hope to bring together persons interested in both the history and the archaeology of the region, to identify research questions that will benefit from both perspectives. We need the knowledge and advice of persons familiar with Purchase history so that we can prepare a research design for pursuing historical archaeology. Without such a design, such a formulation of basic questions and perspectives, even a major excavation would take place in an interpretive vacuum. If every future project can be related to (and can add to) a coherent program of study, an understanding of all aspects of Purchase heritage will grow much more quickly.

The second part of the project is a field study, an archaeological survey to identify sites in a systematic manner and to retrieve data for a preliminary test of the applicability of our research design. Although a study area has not been chosen quite yet, we are beginning a feasibility study of the are around the old town of Wadesboro, first county seat of Calloway County. Recent research in Maryland has shown that even preliminary survey data can be very informative about the rise and fall of towns, and about the importance of the functions they served in the developing settlement

system. We hope the same perspective can be applied to Wadesboro, and that such a study would provide a valuable first step in tracing the settlement of this area.

There will also be a third step to the grant project, one that actually returns to step one. Not only will the analysis of field data enable us to refine our preliminary research design, but we will also be able to travel to other areas of Kentucky and, using the Jackson purchase as a model, prepare preliminary research designs for historical archaeology in most of the Commonwealth. The final report will enable the Heritage Division to plan more carefully for the protection and study of historic sites throughout Kentucky.

The Murray State University Archaeology program looks forward to working with Society members on this and other projects in the future. We hope that members will help in preparing the research design for this project, and will give us the benefit of their familiarity with west Kentucky history and culture. We will also need volunteers to help with field and laboratory work. With university and community co-operation, historical archaeology can make important contributions to Jackson Purchase history and to preserving west Kentucky's rich heritage.

1. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, 1977.

Bio: Kit Wesler

Professor of archaeology: B.A, Washington University; M.A., PhD University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Dr. Wesler has been a member of the faculty of Murray State University since 1981.